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Sound and Fury: Digital Vigilantism as a Form of Consumer Voice

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Abstract

The authors examine consumer activism as a form of power used by individuals when they experience a perceived failure with organizational service performance. Consumer citizens demonstrate the power of their voices through digital vigilantism consisting of injurious and constructive digital content sharing. The authors use agency theory and power concepts to study an instance in which a public service provider breached consumer performance expectations. They study digital responses to the 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right rally because an independent review found the public service providers culpable. Tweets (n = 73,649) were analyzed utilizing qualitative thematic coding, cluster analysis, and sentiment analysis. Consumer conversations (tweets) during and after the rally yielded five types of digital vigilantism characterized by the following consumer voice clusters: "Shame on them!", "Hear ye, hear ye…", "Can you believe this?", "Let's get 'em!", and "Do the right thing." The authors also present a new facet of digital vigilantism represented by the pessimistic and optimistic power of consumer voice. Several proactive and reactive responses are presented for policy and practice when responding to digital vigilantism.

> Consumer voice is not just a preference-expressing mechanism on the Internet, but also a way for responsible and ethical individuals dedicated to society's collective value system to express themselves.
> —S. Umit Kucuk (2008, p. 6)

When voicing their dissatisfaction, consumers increasingly use social media and cite evidence, whether true or false, to support their opinions. In doing so, they may weaponize the personal information accessible on the internet for shaming behavior, sometimes referred to as doxxing, with a negative intent to "humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual" (Douglas 2016, p. 199). Personally identifiable information (PII) about an individual is sometimes leaked or intentionally released to others (Coleman 2012) with the intention of being helpful or causing harm. While consumers act out online in many ways that may affect marketing and public policy, doxxing (also "doxing") is an emerging issue. In 2019, the Kentucky Senate proposed a bill to ban the doxxing of children after a teen male and a Native American activist confronted each other at a rally in Washington D.C. and both parties were the subject of sensational media coverage and intense social media conversations. In this study, we aim to understand consumer digital responses to an event that elicited similar public sentiment during and after a perceived failure by a public service provider: the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Focusing on understanding the power of voice for digital consumers enables us to explore how citizen activists handle these kinds of situations. We employ Kucuk's (2008) view of voice and power: "Consumer voice is not just a preference-expressing mechanism on the internet, but also a way for responsible and ethical individuals dedicated to society's collective value system to express themselves" (p. 6). This is an important marketing and public policy issue because, as Kucuk states, "An increase in consumer involvement on a collective level may signal to law makers and agencies a need for greater regulation in the market" (p. 2). Our study offers a significant contribution for public service providers, who "increasingly must use resources to monitor contributions by and exchanges

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among various sources and decide whether and how to modify their actions to influence other echoverse components, including business outcomes" (Hewett et al. 2016, p. 2).

Hirschman (1970b) described society as existing "with a certain amount of such dysfunctional or mis-behavior," but "society must be able to marshal from within itself forces which will make as many of the faltering actors as possible revert to the behavior required for its proper functioning" (p. 1). He describes two routes to addressing this as (1) exit, an economic solution in which customers stop buying the organization's products, thus leaving the exchange, and (2) voice, a political solution in which dissatisfaction is expressed to some authority. Kucuk (2008) expanded on Hirschman's view of exit and voice, applying them as two forms of consumer empowerment on the internet: exit-based and voice-based. Connecting exit and voice to power, he explains, "Economically, exit has never been easier than it is currently on the internet" (p. 4). When voices are used collectively online, their use represents consumer dissatisfaction in a larger "echoverse" of consumers, firms, and news media (Hewett et al. 2016).

Huefner and Hunt (2000) described one form of dysfunctional consumer behavior in a service encounter as retaliation, where consumers are "aggressive" with an "intention to get even" (p. 62). In the context of consumer retaliation to company wrongdoing, Loureiro, Haws, and Bearden (2018) assert that "when consumers sense a moral violation, their sense of fairness and justice is disturbed and they seek to regain it" (p. 187). Dysfunctionality associated with retaliation is described as consumer vigilantism (McGregor 2008). This behavior is increasingly taken online, leading to consumers' digital vigilantism. Trottier (2017, p. 56) defines digital vigilantism as

> a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and coordinate retaliation on mobile devices and social platforms. The offending acts range from mild breaches of social protocol to terrorist acts and participation in riots. The vigilantism includes, but is not limited to a "naming and shaming" type of visibility, where the target's home address, work details and other highly sensitive details are published on a public site ("doxing"), followed by online as well as embodied harassment.

To understand how digital consumer voices are represented in a perceived failure by a service provider, we examine them in the context of a major incident involving a public service provider and consumers (citizens): the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the online conversations that ensued. More specifically, we explore digital vigilantism through consumers' use of Twitter in response to the rally. As individuals became increasingly dissatisfied with the public service response to rally misbehavior and violence, they used Twitter to express their dissatisfaction with community public services' failure to fulfill consumer needs—that is, to prevent harm and/or to respond quickly once harm occurs.

Digital vigilantism as a type of consumer voice has yet to be explored in marketing and public policy even though it has significant implications for privacy and other basic rights. Our research highlights a looming gap in consumers' use of social media to communicate with public service providers. We examine the nature of digital vigilantism and the degree to which it demonstrates a range of voices, such as functional/dysfunctional, solution-seeking/retaliatory, and helpful/harmful consumer behavior online. The Unite the Right rally sparked a range of emotions that involved helpful and harmful consumer voice, sometimes making it confusing to distinguish between sound and fury. During and after the rally in Charlottesville, citizens used their voices and weaponized information on social media when they deemed that the city government or police failed to act, protect, and regulate the attendees' actions/behaviors. This study will help us understand how the agency and power of consumer citizen voice may have unintended marketing and public policy consequences affecting individuals (privacy, discrimination, and harassment), organizations (firms and public services), and brands (support for or against various organizations and collective value systems).
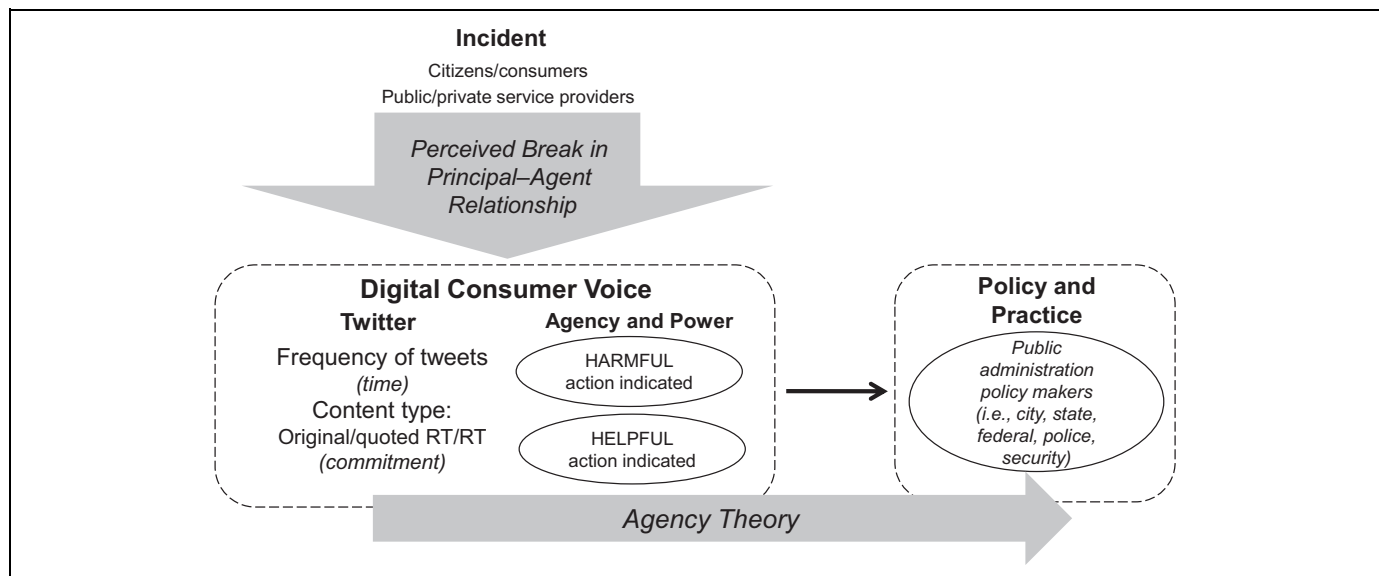
Digital Consumer Voice

When does a tweet demonstrate digital vigilantism and when is it simply the voice of an upset citizen consumer? To identify this difference, we use agency theory and concepts of power to differentiate between consumers' intentions to help or harm on Twitter (see Figure 1). We explore the Twitter conversations around the Charlottesville rally to determine what aspects of digital consumer voice typify digital vigilantism by individuals who employ their agency (consumer power) to address the lack of action by (public) service providers and to seek action aligned with helping service providers (law enforcement) to protect the community versus harming or punishing offenders.

Agency Theory and Power Orientation

Agency theory (Hirschman 1970a, b) applies to relationships in which one party (the principal) assigns tasks to another party (the agent), who then acts on the principal's behalf through mutual agreement or contract (Anderson and Oliver 1987; Jensen and Meckling 1976). Principal–agency relationships are pervasive in marketing, as the agency relationship is a necessary component of all exchange transactions (Bergen, Dutta and Walker 1992). In marketing, the principal may be the consumer and the agent is an organization or service provider. Thus, the principal (consumer) depends on an agent (an organization) to act on its behalf. Research points to several potential issues that may arise when two parties have incongruent interests and goals, such as when information exchanged between principal and agent becomes asymmetrical, environments become uncertain, and goals conflict (Krafft 1999). To understand this relationship as it relates to voice, we review literature on power orientation, reward focus, and legitimate authority.

Power orientation. In this study, power is defined as "the relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding

Figure 1. Digital consumer voice framework: service failures and digital vigilantism.
Note: RT = retweet.

resources or administering punishments" (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003, p. 265) and relates to control, status, dominance, and social hierarchies. Power can be perceived as the distribution of control in the agency relationship. Both parties have incomplete information about the other. Often the information asymmetry is in favor of the service provider (Jensen and Meckling 1976), but this perspective has changed over time as the internet has become a dominant medium for exchange and interactions. As described by Chaney (2019), the internet allows for increased empowerment through many forms, especially through the ability to obtain information and share information with others. Consumer power can be utilized individually, such as in the distribution of content online (i.e., Hajli and Sims 2015), or the power may come from groups, as when consumers share information through networks such as social media and support groups. Consumers may also utilize crowd-based power through the ability to "pool, mobilize, and structure resources in ways that benefit both the individuals and the groups" (Labrecque et al. 2013, p. 264).

Consumers use their power of voice to influence organizations, government, and other individuals (Constantinides and Fountain 2008). The act of posting one's viewpoint or sharing sentiment online contributes to a sense of personal empowerment (Papacharissi 2002). Customer power is only activated by an individual's participation and engagement. Because passive consumers fail to take advantage of their empowerment, only the active consumer is powerful (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006). Literature on social activism has reported that even the least powerful citizens will begin to take more risks once they begin to see that a movement is yielding success (Hiemer and Abele 2012). Knowledge of activist success motivates citizens to defend social activism and encourages them to view activism as a meaningful undertaking. However, some citizens may

remain discouraged and feel powerless if they perceive state or corporate interests taking priority over their own interests (Cross et al. 2015).

Reward focus. Power influences reward-seeking actions. Those equipped with more power are more likely to engage and take action to benefit society (e.g., assisting law enforcement; Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson 2003) and to actively seek rewards (Galinsky, Gruenfeld and Magee 2003) than those with less power. Furthermore, agency theory proposes that agents performing expected functions are rewarded, whereas agents who digress from expected functions are not (Anderson and Oliver 1987). Within a principal–agent relationship, principals may utilize power in efforts to influence the agent to successfully complete contractual obligations. This may occur in many ways, depending on the focus of the expected outcomes and the relationship between the principal(s) and agent(s). For instance, digital consumer voice may be utilized to call for agent action or to assist agents in reaching expected outcomes that may benefit them or society. Twitter may serve as means to this power and voice.

Legitimate authority. Citizens are more willing to collaborate with law enforcement agencies when citizens deem law enforcement to be legitimate social authorities (Tyler and Fagan 2008). Citizens are also more likely to report neighborhood crimes when they believe law enforcement will act in a fair manner (Tyler and Huo 2002).

Group identity (in-group/out-group identification). Mercer (2014) argues that people can share group emotion through shared identity with a group. Group identity reaffirms an "us versus them" perspective (Risse and Sikkink 2016). Public shaming establishes boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, and shaming is a nonviolent resistance tool to influence the way groups behave (Jacquet 2016). Certain linguistic indicators can

suggest a group perspective. Pronouns used in language expression reveal how an individual references those inside and outside of the interaction (Pennebaker 2011).

When viewed through the lens of agency theory, a public service failure like the Charlottesville event means the agent fails to satisfactorily perform the principal's contractual expectations. In a cross-cultural study of consumers' responses to service failures, Chan and Wan (2008) found that dissatisfied U.S. consumers tended to engage in complaining behavior (which the authors called "voice") directed to the agent organization and spread negative word-of-mouth communication within their social network rather than exiting the relationship or bringing the issue to third parties such as the media or consumer agencies. In a modern setting where dissatisfied consumers can digitally share information, social media reverses the power asymmetry of traditional principal–agent relationships. Social networks serve as a medium for consumers to wield power through voice that amplifies beyond the agent organization.

We focus on the content of consumers' voice through social media messages in response to a perceived break in their principal–agent expectations. Previous work on public communication related to a break in consumer trust may provide us with some insight. In their study of the message narratives expressed in print media reports of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill and the 2010 BP oil spill, Humphreys and Thompson (2014) found four types of narratives, three of which have application beyond the oil spills: (1) exception (the crisis is an aberrant deviation from the norm), (2) reprobation (punishment of wrongdoing), and (3) restoration (righting wrongs to restore justice by addressing the allocation of resources to restore the situation to the precrisis state). The authors also note that both reprobation and restoration serve to restore consumer trust in expert systems. Trust is important in all social and economic contracts between a principal and an organization. A call for justice may also drive the digital vigilante behavior of consumers in situations of perceived breaks in trust (such as the Charlottesville event). One dominant theme explored in our tweet analysis is consumers' public calls for agent (government officials, brands, and other organizations) accountability for fulfillment of expected responsibilities and to either punish wrongdoing (reprobation) or allocate resources to restore justice to a precrisis state (restoration).

Whether consumers wield their voices to help or to harm is an important aspect of this research. We propose that consumer online response can indicate consumers' desire to "fix" the principal–agent relationship or it can communicate dissatisfaction in the future of the contractual relationship. Through both actions, consumers exercise their agency through their online power of voice. We also believe that optimism (conversely, pessimism) may play a role in how individuals express their voice digitally. Bortolotti (2018, p. 531) acknowledges a connection between optimism in particular, and agency, or the behavior of agents:

> In order for us to be successful agents in the face of constant challenges, we need to believe that we can change things for the better, and in order to do that we need to have a sense of competence, control, and efficacy that propels us forward, a sense that our goals are indeed desirable and attainable.

Optimistic and Pessimistic Language

In addition to examining the Charlottesville conversation from an agency and power-orientation perspective, we categorize two variables describing the tone of consumer voices: optimistic and pessimistic. Optimism reflects how individuals handle stressful situations, with more optimism being "beneficial for physical and psychological well-being" (Scheier, Carver and Bridges 1994, p. 1063). In contrast, pessimism is linked to depression, anxiety, and avoidant coping patterns (Chang, D'Zurilla, and Maydeu-Olivares 1994) and is characterized by a feeling of anxiety coupled with a hopeless attitude toward future events (Pietruska and Armony 2013).

Optimism and pessimism are also associated with risk. People are considered optimistic if they consider their goals to be attainable and pessimistic if they consider their goals to be unattainable (Carver and Scheier 2009). On the one hand, uncertain individuals may also become risk averse, feeling a lack of control over their situation and environment (Pietruska and Armony 2013). Consumers may experience both optimism and pessimism. For example, climate change activists exhibiting pessimistic viewpoints are generally hopeful about the contributions of political activism but feel deeply dispirited by the level of power wielded by corporations in the political process. On the other hand, angry activists tend to be optimistic because they perceive situations as controllable and certain (Cross et al. 2015). Research shows that the optimism of angry people should bias them to engage in higher-risk behaviors (Pietruska and Armony 2013).

The power of consumer citizen voice is used in emotionally charged settings when the principal (consumer) believes the agent (an organization) is failing to act on the consumer-citizen's behalf. Such online discourse may have unintended marketing and public policy consequences affecting individuals (privacy, discrimination, harassment), agencies (law enforcement or agency response), and brands (support for or against various organizations and collective value systems). We believe that clustering and examining like-minded tweets from the Charlottesville event is a first step in understanding digital vigilantism as a form of digital consumer voice.

The 2017 Charlottesville "Unite the Right" Rally

In the first week of August 2017, Charlottesville officials stated that they would approve a permit for a "Unite the Right" rally organized by white nationalist activists. While the Saturday rally was scheduled from noon to 5:00 P.M., people started arriving in the early morning. Violence erupted by 11:00 A.M. and, by media accounts, the police were not breaking up fights. By 11:22 A.M., the police declared an unlawful assembly and gave a dispersal order. Protestors and counterprotestors

continued to hurl anger toward each other. Violence continued to percolate throughout the area. At 1:14 P.M., a tweet went out from the Charlottesville Twitter handle (@CvilleCityHall): "CPD & VSP[1] respond to 3-vehicle crash at Water & 4th Streets. Several pedestrians struck. Multiple injuries" (Heim 2017). A rallygoer had rammed his car through a gathering of people, leaving one person dead and 19 injured. Later, a law-enforcement helicopter that had been monitoring the rally activity crashed, leaving two state troopers dead. The news of the fatal crash was reported on Twitter.

An independent review found that the city's poor planning and coordination for the August rally led to "disastrous results" and further concluded that "the mistakes made on August 12 have significantly undermined our community's confidence in government's ability to protect public safety" (Heaphy 2017, p. 151). This lack of confidence was communicated on Twitter, where users around the world watched and reacted to unfolding events via the social media platform. Online, individual viewers were distressed by law enforcement's perceived lack of quality (service) performance. Citizens took to Twitter in response, using hashtags such as #Charlottesville #CvilleAug12 #CvilleCityHall #GoodNightAltRight or #ExposetheAltRight. In the absence of a dedicated Charlottesville police department Twitter account, some people addressed their tweets to the relevant service provider they could identify—Charlottesville City Hall, @CvilleCityHall. For a complete list of the top hashtags representing the events, including those used in this study see Web Appendix A. While many social media platforms were involved in the Charlottesville digital vigilantism, Twitter was especially powerful, and many tweets by public figures fueled the online conversations and the debate about the events as well as the implications for collective societal values.

In trying to understand how consumer citizens react online when citizen-serving organizations (city officials and law enforcement in this case) fall short of their expectations, it is important to identify and categorize the content of actors' collective digital voices. Understanding the unique dimensions of consumer voice is important for both public and private leaders who may feel public and personal pressure to react quickly in uncertain situations.

Methodology

Twitter Conversations as Data

Public outrage and consumer conversations on social media platforms serve as ideal situations for examining the power of voice. We rely exclusively on Twitter data for this study. Twitter data have been used in research as a proxy for social media, and "studies using Twitter data are replicable" making it useful to analyze public conversations (Hewett et al. 2016, p. 6). Citizens are motivated to use Twitter for social activism

because the platform offers real-time, minute-by-minute updates of the events taking place on the ground (Gerbaudo 2012). During such events, citizens create and share specific tweets for a variety of reasons. For example, scientists used their power of voice during the Flint water crisis to share tweets for 12 different purposes, including for the purposes of making a political statement and sharing informational links (Jahng and Lee 2018). For these reasons, we collect and analyze Twitter content related to the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally to understand how and for what purpose consumers use the power of voice. Because our methodology is currently uncommon in public policy and marketing, we provide a detailed overview.

Data Collection

This study focuses on how the power of voice spreads across digital terrain; therefore, the units of analysis are the individual tweets published on Twitter's public newsfeed from August 12 through August 31, 2017. Our data set curates a focused hashtagged conversation of Twitter users who included the most relevant hashtags (e.g., #Charlottesville) in their tweets as a deliberate contribution to public conversations of this topic (Bruns and Burgess 2015). Using the Twitter Archiving Google Sheets (TAGS) system, we started collecting data on August 12, 2017, as rally events unfolded in real time. We used TAGS to collect tweets containing the hashtag #Charlottesville, which we identified through early news reports and a manual examination of Twitter conversations. We did not include tweets including simply "Charlottesville" without the hashtag because a cursory review of Twitter data indicated a mix of tweets with most related to generic topics such as jobs and weather rather than the rally.

Crisis events and situations play out primarily on Twitter (Oh, Agrawal, and Rao 2013) in part because hashtags contained in user tweets enable optimized "search strategies for finding specific topics of shared interest" (Chatfield and Reddick 2015, p. 367). As events unfolded in the first 24 hours and citizen consumers became active in digital vigilante behaviors such as doxxing (e.g., McKay 2017), we expanded our data collection process to capture tweets containing #ExposetheAltRight and #GoodNightAltRight. Citizens collaborated on social media to identify the names and personal information of white nationalists photographed committing acts of violence and they used these dedicated hashtags in their Twitter communications.

We also examined Twitter conversations voicing discord toward other activist groups (e.g., Antifa, Black Lives Matter) to ensure that we captured all viewpoints but did not find centralized hashtags as we did with doxxing tweets. Rather, those citizens used the event hashtag of #Charlottesville or directed their anger toward city officials using the hashtags #CvilleAug12 and #CvilleCityHall. This finding is supported by a VOX-Pol study (Berger 2018) of 27,895 Twitter accounts affiliated with the alt-right movement, which found that top hashtags used by the movement tend to be generic.

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[1] Charlottesville Police Department and Virginia State Police, respectively.

Citizens also reached out to Charlottesville City Council (@CvilleCityHall) or referred to them on Twitter during and after the event using the hashtags #CVilleAug12, #CVille, and #CvilleCityHall. Because Charlottesville police did not have a dedicated Twitter account in August 2017, citizens relied on these hashtags as a way of sharing their opinion to and about law enforcement's service failure. We also confirmed that tweets directed to Charlottesville's official Twitter handle, @CvilleCityHall, did not always include the #Charlottesville hashtag. We deemed these important and relevant voices to include, and in April 2019, we manually scraped an additional 1,614 tweets from August 12 through August 31, 2017 containing the hashtags #CVilleAug12, #CVille, #CvilleCityHall and the Twitter handle @CvilleCityHall. Because tweets using these hashtags were scraped after Twitter purged millions of fake and spambot accounts and their tweets (Morris 2018), some Twitter posts may no longer have been available. Within the resulting data set, we identified 4,812 unique hashtags. More than half (2,826 hashtags) were used just once.

Retweets

Metaxas et al. (2015) found that survey participants reported retweeting information because it was interesting (94%), was informational (77%), or reflected a political viewpoint they endorsed (68%). To fully understand how citizens used the power of voice during the Charlottesville event, we considered it important to include and examine all content, including original tweets, quoted retweets (in which the Twitter user adds a hashtag or brief comment prior to retweeting someone else's content), and retweets (shared content posted by another source without changing or commenting on it). Of the 73,649 tweets included in this study, 68,925 (94%) were coded as retweets with the remainder coded as quoted retweets (5%) or original content (1%). Retweeting signals agreement and trust with the content message (Metaxas et al. 2015).

In their study on social sharing on Twitter following the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015, Garcia and Rimé (2019) find that "more intense emotions are shared more frequently and more extensively" (p. 618). When applied to Twitter, consumers who originally learn about a brand's unjust behavior become emotionally charged to the extent that 70% of them feel the need to share—or tweet—original content about the event. Then, two-thirds of their followers (secondary audience) who read the tweets will retweet or share quoted retweets with a tertiary audience (Christophe et al. 2008). For these reasons, we include all content types in our data set, including tweets, quoted retweets, and retweets.

We initially captured 86,420 tweets from our three collection streams. After cleaning the data for duplicates, non-English tweets, and other unrelated content (e.g., job postings), we eliminated 12,771 tweets. Prior to analysis, we used spell-check to correct obvious misspellings, such as "peice" instead of "piece," but we did not correct any netspeak words (e.g., "b4" for "before") or remove punctuation-based emoticons, which can be accommodated by the sentiment analysis tool

we used in data analysis. After preparing and cleaning data, the final usable data set consisted of 73,649 tweets.

Data Analysis

Power of Voice

We examined the tweets using a content analysis approach, including qualitative thematic coding of the tweet content. Consumer power is only activated with participation and engagement (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006). We operationalize power of voice in the Charlottesville event using three key dimensions: frequency, commitment, and purpose.

Frequency of participation. We defined the frequency of participation construct as the loudest citizens, or those who express their voices the most on Twitter by frequently tweeting and/or retweeting. Frequency of tweets from an individual is an important factor to examine because it quantifies the concept of volume of voice. We executed a script to determine the number of times a username tweeted using the hashtags listed previously.

Time commitment. We defined the time commitment construct as the creation and sharing of original content (tweets). We coded each tweet as a retweet, a quoted retweet (where the user added his/her own comments before retweeting), or original content by the user. Original content indicates greater time commitment, whereas simple retweets take the least time of the three tweet types. The TAGS program flagged 94% of the data set as retweets and signaled quoted retweets by automatically inserting the letters "RT" into the middle of Twitter content indicating where the original content began (e.g., "Keep this trending until he's found! RT [@username] Do you know this man? He is a cowardly Nazi who needs to be brought to justice. #GoodNightAltRight"). A formula script was written and executed to automatically count quoted retweets.

Tweet message purpose. Tweets were coded for one of four themes related to their message: (1) sharing information or expressing opinion; (2) solution seeking; (3) shaming; and (4) calls to cause harm, damage, or take revenge. We performed coding and content analysis of the data using an inductive approach (Thomas 2006) proven reliable by marketing scholars in the categorization and assessment of raw data (e.g., Lichy, Kachour, and Khvatova 2017).

In the data set, 25,930 tweets (including original, quoted retweets, and retweets) contained PII for individuals involved in the Charlottesville event. Using Douglas (2016) as guidance, the coders first determined if the PII tweet was shared with a negative intent to "humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual" (p. 199). Tweets determined to have a negative intention were coded as having a purpose to shame/punish/humiliate, whereas those tweets sharing PII for the purpose of assisting law enforcement were coded for solution seeking. Because digital vigilantism includes behaviors ranging from mild to extreme actions (Trottier 2017), we considered it important to code tweets accordingly. While some

Table 1. Actions Indicated in Tweets by Content Analysis.

Example Tweets	Tweets (Including Retweets [RT])	Identified Themes	Purpose of Tweet
"Checkout @ABC #nightline special on #Charlottesville, VA" "Two wrongs never make a right. Antifa is still wrong. Had they not arrived #Charlottesville would not have happened" "RT @DCExaminer US Commission on Civil Rights refuses to condemn 'club-wielding Antifa' in #Charlottesville"	39,366	Share information/ opinion	Sharing news articles, events (e.g., city hall hearings), reports, and for expressing political opinions not related to sharing, solutions, or harming.
"Crybaby. Own your hateful racism. I have no sympathy. #Charlottesville RT @RawStory 'I'm terrified': Neo-Nazi blubbers like a baby in video reporting he's wanted for arrest in Charlottesville" "The location of Michael Tubbs Compound #exposethenatzis #ExposeTheAltRight @washingtonpost @guardiannews @vicenews @ShaunKing" [Photo attachment includes GPS coordinates to a residential home along with phone numbers and email address of individual.]	22,390	Shame/punish/humiliate	Making jokes at the expense of an individual, name calling, doxxing PII for the purpose of intimidation and outing to employers, universities, and communities (not for assisting law enforcement).
"Can you identify these men if so call the @FBIRichmond office or share photos with them." "Report #DailyStomer [sic] to Tucows. Demand that @Tucows refuse to host them. #ExposeTheAltRight #WhiteSupremacists #Charlottesville #Nazis" "Hey @GovernorVA @TerryMcAuliffe Do your jobs!"	10,876	Solution seeking	Holding elected officials accountable, doxxing PII for the purpose assisting law enforcement, pressuring corporations through boycotts/ petitions, supporting victims (e.g., GoFundMe pages) and promoting community well-being (e.g., sharing generic message of "love not hate")
"It's time to #PunchANazi!!! #Charlottesville" "Hey alt-left, remember your 'Punch a Nazi' campaign? I call this one 'Run over a Communist'!? #Charlottesville" [referring to fatal car attack of Heather Heyer]	1,017	Harm	Threating or supporting harm, violence, or damage to a person or property, focusing on revenge and retaliation.

participants shared PII on Twitter with nefarious intentions, others considered naming of violent rally participants as "public interest reporting" (Miller 2018).

We arrived at the four thematic categories through initial coding of themes by two separate judges (with social media management experience). They hand-coded the purpose of the tweets over a 12-week period. It is important to note that it was only possible for coders to manually review such a large data set because so many of the same tweets and articles were overwhelmingly shared during the Charlottesville event. For example, five tweets posted by the Twitter account @YesYoureRacist comprised 23% of the data set. Thus, a coder was able to review just five tweets and then apply the coding scheme to 16,599 additional tweets.

A comparison of 250 initial tweets indicated an intercoder reliability of .96, falling within the accepted guidelines of .8–1.0 (Perreault and Leigh 1989). All disagreements were resolved by discussion. After initial coding, 18 themes were identified and reviewed by the coders, who then refined and

consolidated the tweets into four content categories. This process follows Creswell's (2015) suggestion of keeping research relevant and manageable by continuing to collapse and combine themes into no more than seven distinct categories. As we show in Table 1, the content themes, listed in order of presence in the data set (including retweets), include sharing information, shaming, solution seeking, and harming.

Digital Vigilante Typology

We determined types of digital voice using cluster analysis of the tweets and then text analysis of the cluster contents. We used the three categories of coded tweets as clustering variables in a cluster analysis: frequency, time commitment (content type), and purpose (sharing, solution seeking, shaming, and harm/retaliation). Given our sample size and mix of categorical and continuous variables, two-step clustering is preferred to hierarchical or partitioning methods (Norušis 2011). Our sample size (n = 73,649) exceeds segmentation scholars'

recommendations of using a data set equal to or larger than 70 times the number of variables, which in our study is three clustering variables (Dolnicar et al. 2014). We performed analysis using the log-likelihood measure in SPSS 25. We used Schwarz's Bayesian information criterion due to its objectivity in the selection process, thereby eliminating possible bias of manual and traditional clustering approaches (Norušis 2011).

Cluster Validation

Next, we validated our clusters using two methods. First, the silhouette measure of cohesion and separation test offers an overall goodness-of-fit measure in the two-step clustering process. We found a silhouette measure of .9, signifying good solution quality. Next, we assessed the stability of our clustering results by using SPSS 25 to split the data into two random halves (Group A, n = 36,879; Group B, n = 36,770) and running the two-step clustering method using the same variables and procedures (Sarstedt and Mooi 2014). We then compared the two solutions' cluster centroids using an independent samples t-test. No significant difference was found between the scores for Group A (n = 5, M = 7.42, SD = 12.83) and Group B (n = 5, M = 5.59, SD = 6.43; t(8) = .285, p = .78), d = .2; thus, it may be assumed the overall solution has a high degree of stability. All tweets in our data set (n = 73,649) are included in the cluster analysis.

Text Analysis

Semantic analysis is a useful tool for analysis of consumer voices expressed on social media because words constitute meaning based on their presence with other words (Goddard 2011). To add context and further expose patterns and trends in our power of voice clusters, we used Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to quantify the psychological dimensions contained in these messages. Language reflects the emotions and cognition individuals are experiencing at a particular moment in time and in a particular context. Text analysis is useful in evaluating implied rather than overt dimensions through language analysis, especially as they relate to social standing, power orientation, status, and influence (Humphreys and Wang 2017).

As part of the clustering process, each tweet was assigned a cluster membership variable. Tweets were then sorted by their cluster and analyzed for sentiment characteristics for power orientation, reward focus, optimistic dimensions, and pessimistic dimensions. While there are limitations to sentiment tools, scholars have found these tools useful in examining online conversations and discourse related to a specific public (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). Drawing from Humphreys and Wang (2017) and extant research, we use theory to inform us which linguistic dimensions to include in the sentiment analysis. We include the four dimensions from literature related to agency theory and power.

Power orientation. We operationalize power using the power orientation dimension in LIWC to calculate the percentage of words used in each tweet that reflect the need for power or how much text focuses on prestige, control, or status. Messages indicating a high level of power orientation contain words such as "demand," "weak," or "powerful" in their tweets, indicating a sense of dominance and control over others (Trapnell and Paulhus 2012).

Reward focus. We operationalize reward seeking using the reward focus dimensions computed by LIWC, which refer to words and phrases involving rewards, incentives, and/or positive goals (Pennebaker et al. 2015).

Legitimate authority. We operationalize legitimacy and fairness using the moral foundation dictionary developed by Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) for use with short pieces of text. The dimension of authority (virtue and vice) determines the percentage of words related to both respect (positive connotation) and disrespect (negative connotation) for authority. The dimension of fairness (virtue) identifies the percentage of words related to both fairness and justice (Garten et al. 2016).

Group identity. To understand whether a participant who engages in shaming behaviors is aware of others, we operationalize and test the pronoun dimension (which includes "we," "you," "they," and "she/he"), calculated by LIWC, together with in-group (vice and virtue), calculated using the moral foundation dictionary, which identifies words indicating group cohesion (e.g., "unity, family or traitor"; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009).

Optimistic and pessimistic language. Because digital vigilantism has not been examined from the lens of optimism and pessimism, we utilized two approaches to ensure a thorough evaluation. In addition to LIWC, we utilized Diction 7.0 software, which, unlike LIWC, offers a ready-made optimism variable on a low to high scale of word percentages. Relevant to our study, Diction 7.0 was previously deemed valid in optimism research using Twitter data (e.g., Zaharopoulos and Kwok 2017).

For consistency with LIWC variables used across the other linguistic constructs, we created a meaningful grouping of LIWC dimensions relevant to optimism and pessimism. First, we drew on extant literature to compile a set of words that are associated with both optimism and pessimism as well as keywords associated with the constructs (see the list in Web Appendix B). Because our data consist of words in social media posts, we used latent semantic indexing tools to search for words that are semantically related to the main keyword(s) by topic and scope. Next, following the process of Slatcher et al. (2007), we uploaded our word lists separately into LIWC for analysis. In line with these general concepts of optimism and pessimism in the literature review and the scale items that are relevant to each construct, LIWC identified five dimensions to help us analyze the optimistic language (social, cognitive processing, focus on future, certainty, and anger) and five dimensions to determine pessimistic language (sadness,

Table 2. Cluster Summaries with Content Type and Actions Indicated in Tweets.

	Content Type			Actions Indicated in Tweets			
Cluster	Retweet Frequency	Quoted-RT Frequency	Original Content Frequency	Inform Frequency	Shame Frequency	Seek Solution Frequency	Harm Frequency
"Shame on them!"	21,409	0	0	0	21,409	0	0
"Hear ye, hear ye…"	36,385	0	0	36,385	0	0	0
"Can you believe this?"	9,370	0	0	0	0	9,370	0
"Let's get 'em!"	1,761	311	34	484	492	116	1,014
"Do the right thing"	0	3,694	685	2,497	489	1,390	3
Total	68,925	4,005	719	39,366	22,390	10,876	1,017

anxiety, tentativeness, health, and risk), as shown in Web Appendix C.

We created composite optimistic and pessimistic variables by merging the LIWC constructs and utilizing the same high–low scale with larger numbers indicating a higher percentage of words used. After determining LIWC constructs, the entire data set was uploaded into LIWC, each tweet text was analyzed, and a score was generated for the dimensions related to agency theory and the power of voice. Web Appendix D summarizes final dimensions used for the sentiment analysis.

Results

To understand how consumers use the power of voice in response to a perceived agency failure, we first clustered Twitter data using three dimensions related to power of voice: commitment (type of content), frequency (number of tweets), and actions indicated in tweets. Our cluster analysis resulted in five digital vigilantism clusters based on the type of message content in each cluster, as shown in Table 2. We identify five ways digital consumer voice is expressed on social media platforms during and after an event that breaches performance expectations: (1) "Shame on them!", (2) "Hear ye, hear ye . . .", (3) "Can you believe this?", (4) "Let's get 'em!", and (5) "Do the right thing."

Digital Vigilantism Clusters

While most cluster content is shared during the first five days of the event, cluster activities vary by cluster. To understand the type of vigilantism these clusters illustrate, we designate each cluster with the digital consumer voice it represents and provide graphics to demonstrate the details (Figure 2).

To assist in understanding the digital consumer voice portrayed by each cluster during the Charlottesville event, we also analyzed the frequency of each cluster and key news headlines for the first 19 days of the event (see Figure 3). A more comprehensive event summary is provided in Web Appendix E.

Shame on them! (n = 21,409). The content included in the "Shame on them!" cluster concentrates on retweeting messages related to shaming. This cluster did have the highest percentage of words related to future focus (.94), a dimension we identified from the literature as being an indicator of optimism. The anger

dimension (a high percentage of angry words is associated with a high level of optimism) had the lowest percentage of any cluster (.61). Scores for other optimism-related words did not have high percentages. The Diction 7.0 program scored this cluster content as being the lowest in optimistic language (34.53). Pessimistic indication is negligible (.73) in this cluster, because it had the fewest words related to pessimistic language, including tentativeness (.33), sadness (.08), anxiety (.2), health (.05), and risk (.08). For dimensions related to agency theory and power constructs, the messages in this cluster contained the lowest number of words related to positive societal aspects of respect for authority figures (authority-virtue = .07) and fairness and justice (fairness-virtue = .001). Shame tweets also reflected the lowest percentage of words related to reward (.25). All other relevant dimensions scored in the moderate range.

The majority (98%) of "Shame on them!" content is shared on days 1 through 5 of the Charlottesville event, with highest number of tweets (n = 9,643) shared on day 1. Key headlines related to shaming content on day one include Charlottesville rally organizer Jason Kessler fleeing a news conference (O'Connor 2017) and images circulating of the Deandre Harris beating (Sabella 2017). Mainstream news organizations, including the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Vox*, *Fast Company*, *NBC News*, and *Washington Post* published articles about a Twitter user using the handle @Yes-YoureRacist who began publicly identifying white nationalists who participated in the Charlottesville rally. Cluster content spiked again on day 8 (n = 107), when influential citizen activist Shaun King (@ShaunKing) tweeted a $30,000 award for the identification and arrest of assailants seen in the beating of DeAndre Harris (King 2017a), and on day 16 (n = 51), when Alex Michael Ramos turned himself in to law enforcement and was charged with the beating of DeAndre Harris (Elliot 2017).

Hear ye, hear ye…(n = 36,385). "Hear ye, hear ye . . ." is the largest of the five clusters, focused on retweeting for sharing content and opinions. It has high percentages of words related to the optimistic dimension of anger (1.63) and the pessimistic dimension of health (.27). This content ranked the highest on the Diction 7.0 optimism (57.31) scale. For dimensions related to agency theory and power constructs, this cluster scored high in risk (.57), reflecting a high presence of words
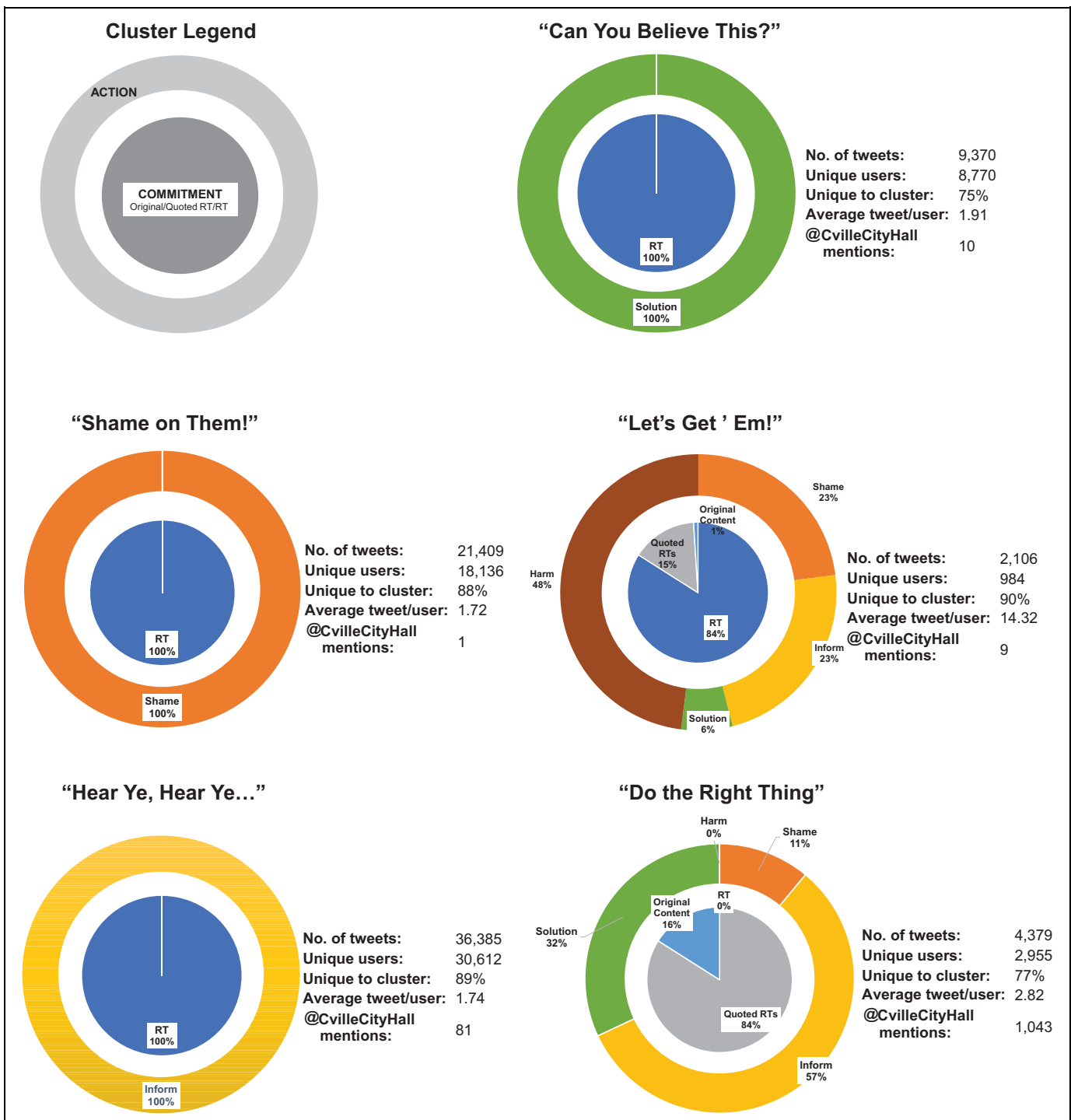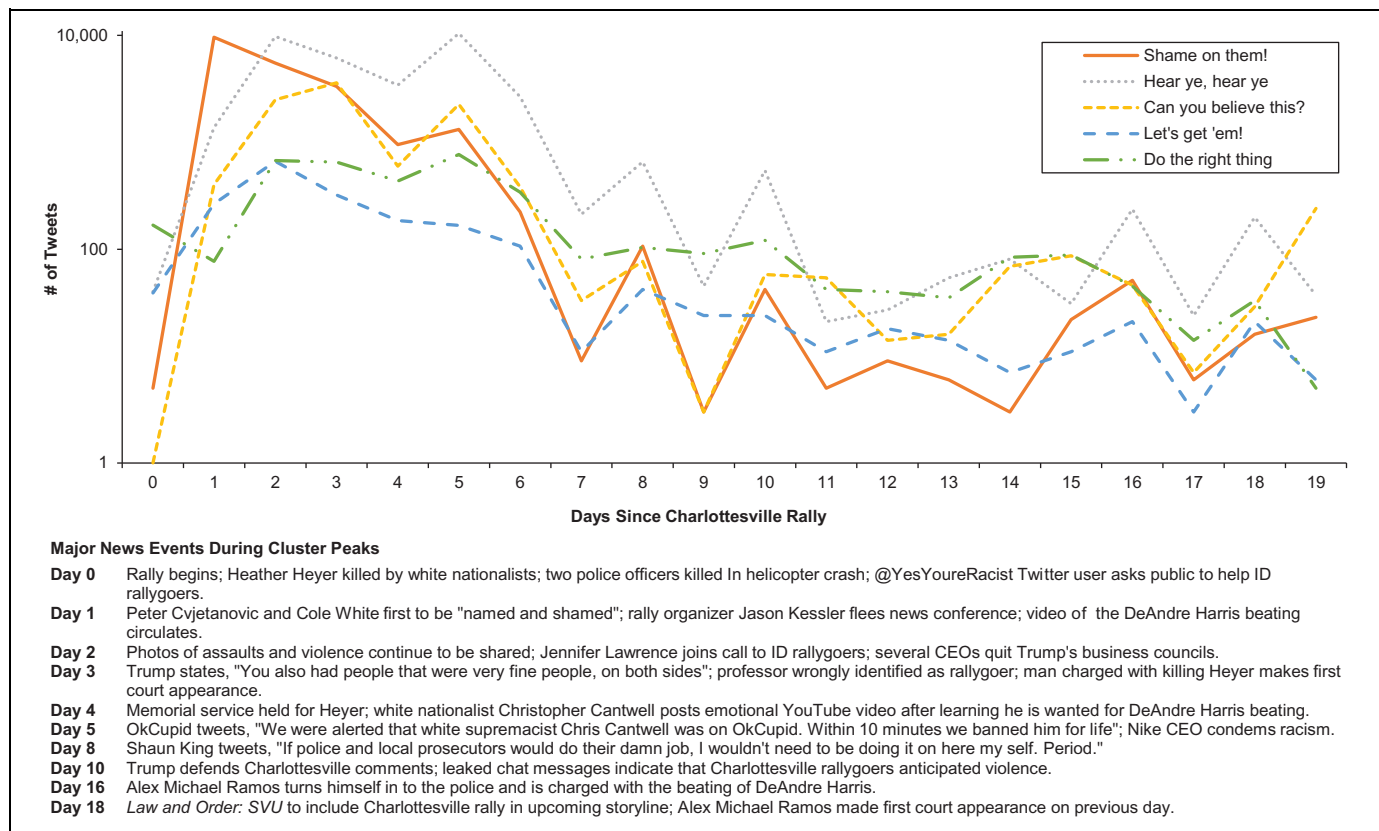
Figure 2. Digital consumer voice clusters.
Note: RT = retweet.

and phrases involving rewards, incentives, and positive goals (Pennebaker et al. 2015). All other dimension results are in the moderate range.

The majority (86%) of "Hear ye, hear ye . . ." content is shared on days 1 through 5, with the highest number of tweets (n = 10,416) on day 5, when white nationalist Christopher

Cantwell's YouTube video went viral. In his video, Cantwell expressed fear that the police want to speak with him, and then he began to cry (Cummings 2017). Cluster content spiked several times throughout the time frame of our study: on day 8 (n = 656), when the Tiki Torch Company was featured in a *New York Times* article (Schonbrun 2017); day 10 (n = 545), when

Major News Events During Cluster Peaks

Day 0 Rally begins; Heather Heyer killed by white nationalists; two police officers killed In helicopter crash; @YesYoureRacist Twitter user asks public to help ID rallygoers.

Day 1 Peter Cvjetanovic and Cole White first to be "named and shamed"; rally organizer Jason Kessler flees news conference; video of the DeAndre Harris beating circulates.

Day 2 Photos of assaults and violence continue to be shared; Jennifer Lawrence joins call to ID rallygoers; several CEOs quit Trump's business councils.

Day 3 Trump states, "You also had people that were very fine people, on both sides"; professor wrongly identified as rallygoer; man charged with killing Heyer makes first court appearance.

Day 4 Memorial service held for Heyer; white nationalist Christopher Cantwell posts emotional YouTube video after learning he is wanted for DeAndre Harris beating.

Day 5 OkCupid tweets, "We were alerted that white supremacist Chris Cantwell was on OkCupid. Within 10 minutes we banned him for life"; Nike CEO condems racism.

Day 8 Shaun King tweets, "If police and local prosecutors would do their damn job, I wouldn't need to be doing it on here my self. Period."

Day 10 Trump defends Charlottesville comments; leaked chat messages indicate that Charlottesville rallygoers anticipated violence.

Day 16 Alex Michael Ramos turns himself in to the police and is charged with the beating of DeAndre Harris.

Day 18 *Law and Order: SVU* to include Charlottesville rally in upcoming storyline; Alex Michael Ramos made first court appearance on previous day.

Figure 3. Frequency of #Charlottesville cluster content (shown in logarithmic scale).

thousands of leaked chats showed that white nationalists in Charlottesville had anticipated and planned for violence (Morris 2017); day 16 (n = 237), when Alex Michael Ramos turned himself in (Elliot 2017); and day 18 (n = 199), when Charlottesville officials and business leaders launched a new marketing campaign promoting Charlottesville as a city that "stands for love" (Mckenzie 2017).

Can you believe this? (n = 9,370). "Can you believe this?" is the only cluster with a focus on seeking solutions, which primarily involved assisting law enforcement. This cluster fits with the restoration narrative found by Humphreys and Thompson (2014). The cluster's content reflects the highest percentages across all clusters for words related to optimism, including social (14.55) and cognitive processing (6.61). In terms of dimensions related to agency theory and power constructs, the content reflects a high volume of pronouns (9.65) indicating in-group acceptance, in addition to high percentages of both power orientation content (6.95) and sense of fairness (1.16). Content also contained the highest percentage of words for authority vice (.37), indicating a lack of respect for authority figures and agencies.

The majority (89%) of "Can you believe this?" content is shared on days 1 through 5, with the highest number of tweets (n = 3,598) on day 3, when President Trump stated, "You also had some very fine people on both sides" (Nelson and Swanson

2017). The content spiked two additional times, including on day 15 (n = 87), when a video went viral showing *Reveal* host Al Letson jumping in and protecting a white nationalist from attacks (*Reveal* 2017). Content also spiked on day 19 (n = 241), when the *Washington Post* published an article in which activist Shaun King stated, "I spoke to the Charlottesville Police Department, two FBI agents, and the state police. It was surreal. The only thing they knew about the attackers was stuff they got from my [social media] timelines!" (Shapira 2017).

Let's get 'em! (n = 2,106). The "Let's get 'em!" cluster is characterized by the high frequency of engagement (17.08 average tweets) in retweeting content associated with revenge and seeking harm. Messages in this cluster contained the lowest volume of pronouns (3.92) and words associated with power orientation (1.86), with both dimensions related to agency theory and power constructs. This cluster has the lowest percentage of words related to future focus (.3), thus reflecting low optimistic tone. This cluster fits with the reprobation narrative found by Humphreys and Thompson (2014).

The majority (82%) of "Let's get 'em!" content was shared on days 1 through 5, with the highest number of tweets (n = 664) on day 2, when counterrallies (i.e., anti–white supremacy) were held across the country (Paul and Sandoval 2017); Apple chief executive officer Tim Cook condemned white supremacy (Leswing 2017); business leaders at Merck, Under Armour,

Intel, Campbell Soup, General Electric, and 3M quit Trump's business councils (*Los Angeles Times* 2017); and Peter Tefft's father publicly denounced his son after his son was outed as a rallygoer (Chappell 2017). This cluster differs from the other clusters because the content is shared early in the event and then tapers off with no peaks or resurgence of activities.

Do the right thing (n = 4,379). Communication in the "Do the right thing" cluster is characterized by a focus on sharing quoted retweets and original content. Messages contain the highest percentage of optimistic language related to certainty (1.15) and reward (.77) but the lowest optimistic language related to social processes (8.11). In terms of pessimism-related words, this cluster had the lowest percentages across all clusters for anxiety (.51), sadness (.44), health (.3), risk (.7) and tentativeness (1.22). Regarding the agency theory construct, this cluster contained the highest percentage of words associated with respect for authority (.5).

Seventy-one percent of the "Do the right thing" content was shared on days zero through five, with the highest number of tweets (n = 769) on day five, when Shaun King shared seven tweets publicly identifying Alex Michael Ramos as one of the attackers of DeAndre Harris. He directed a tweet "To the Charlottesville Police Department, @TerryMcAuliffe, and the @FBI Here, I will spell out the brutality of Michael Ramos. ARREST HIM" (King 2017b). This cluster differs from other clusters because content is consistently retweeted at a rate of 80 tweets per day after day 5, with slight spikes on day 8 (n = 104) and day 10 (n = 121).

Overall, our cluster findings show that the news cycle was likely responsible for driving 92% of the Charlottesville tweets, especially in the clusters "Shame on them!", "Hear ye, hear ye ...", and "Can you believe this?" More than 80% of tweets were shared during the first six days of the Charlottesville event, with a significant decrease in tweeting across all clusters beginning with day 7. News headlines that are shared online lead to continued emotional reactions by the public, who consequently demanded action by government and public officials. Interestingly, the "Let's get 'em!" cluster reflected just 3% of our total data set, yet 48% of the tweets in this cluster were coded as seeking harm, including doxxing or the public release of PII, both signs of possible troll activities. Trolls tend to go beyond normal disagreements or provocation and "instrumentalize the rhetoric of 'incivility' by deploying strategies that aim to either incite or celebrate hostility and violence" (Asenas and Hubble 2018, p. 48).

Social media platforms enable the creation of "distributed democracy efforts" and "digital neighborhoods," where active citizens assume certain government responsibilities and tasks to solve a communal problem or improve a local community (Mergel 2012). This behavior extends to Twitter when public institutions remain silent during a crisis, forcing consumers to seek out and share news and information (Medina and Diaz 2016). As seen in the "Do the right thing" cluster, consumers actively served as amateur sleuths, scouring the internet and collaborating globally to identify perpetrators of violent acts

when they perceived inactivity by the Charlottesville police department. Some consumers used Twitter to encourage brands to cease doing business with white nationalist groups present at the Charlottesville rally, whereas other consumers encouraged the same brands to resist taking actions. We find peaks in cluster activities related to brands on day two (August 14), when several chief executive officers quit Trump's business councils over his Charlottesville comments (*Los Angeles Times* 2017); on day 4 (August 16), when Apple donated $1 million each to the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League (Leswing 2017); and on day 8 (August 20), when the *New York Times* published an article highlighting damage done to the Tiki Torch brand (Schonbrun 2017).

Discussion

Consumers exercise their power in many ways, including exit and use of voice. Early research in consumer behavior focused on consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, examining how consumers behave when dissatisfied with a good or service (e.g., Oliver and DeSarbo 1988). Researchers have also examined consumer boycott motivation and behavior (Klein, Smith, and John 2004), including recent research on consumer communication about boycotts via Twitter (Makarem and Jae 2016). Indeed, previous research on agency relations in marketing settings has focused on product choice or on boycotts (e.g., Zureik and Mowshowitz 2005). With our research, we highlight Twitter use as a means of utilizing individual and collective power through consumer voice when people respond to a perceived service failure. The five clusters illustrate the relationship between (public) service failures and consumer activism. We suggest managerial actions and recommended responses, as shown in Figure 4.

In the Charlottesville incident, the government failed to fulfill the obligations of an agent, thus motivating some citizen-consumers (principals) to act as de facto police, utilizing social media as their medium and their voices as their weaponry. We believe this pattern can be repeated as the result of a service failure involving any type of organization. When an agent accrues information and applies an understanding for environmental uncertainty, there is a movement toward role reversal between principal and agent. "Those armed with power and the capacities of decision-making become themselves subjected to the authority of the rectification procedures they previously applied" (Ebrahim and Weisband 2007, p. 6). In such acts, the principals work to rebuild equilibrium in what Humphreys and Thompson (2014) refer to as "just-world coping."

Some citizens sought to identify and publicly shame any and every white nationalist in attendance at the rally, whether they committed a crime or not. Others focused on identifying only the white nationalists seen in photos and videos committing violent acts. While thousands of Twitter users participated in identification efforts by circulating photos and videos of perceived wrongdoers, activist Shaun King funneled digital evidence directly to the Charlottesville Police
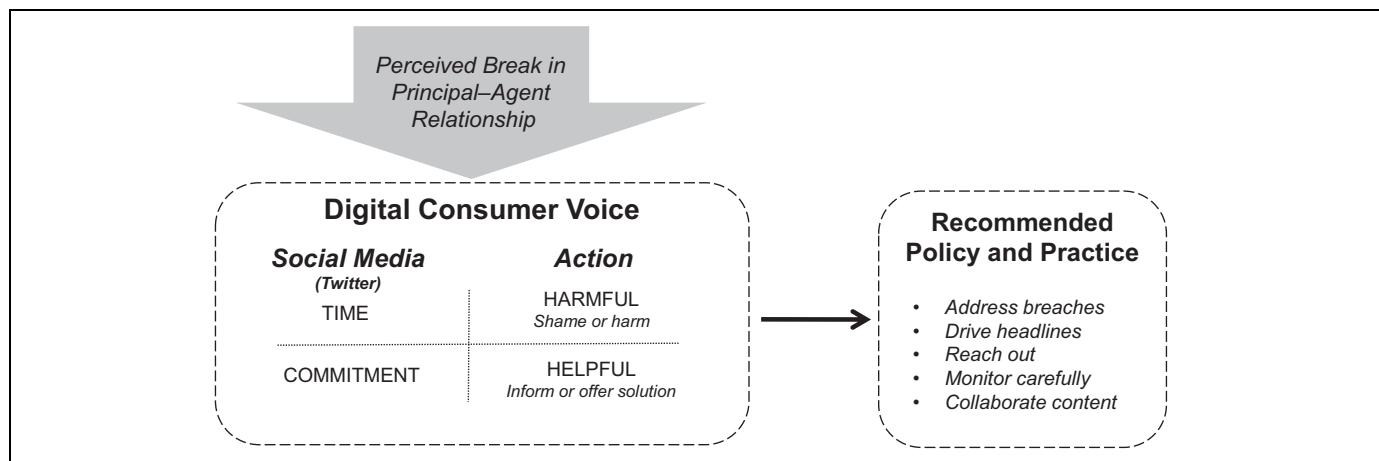
Figure 4. Public service failures and digital vigilantism: consumer commitment/action and policy response.

Department. King became one of the most powerful voices on Twitter, holding law enforcement accountable. While shaming and demanding justice appear to be dichotomous behaviors, the desire to enforce social norms can motivate both helpful and harmful actions.

While engaged citizens sought different outcomes, those engaged in doxxing contributed to privacy violations and breaches of fundamental rights using an approach that Trottier (2017) calls "weaponized visibility" (p. 55). By publicly collaborating on the Twitter platform to identify Unite the Right rally participants, citizens created unwanted, highly visible content with a lasting permanence on the internet and shamed those involved in the rally. Although privacy is accepted as one's right "to determine for themselves what they want to keep private and what they want—or need—to reveal" (Westin 1966, p. 1210), the right to privacy is not as clear in cases where publicly available information is used to identify or cause harm to others. In this case, the Charlottesville incident demonstrates the struggle between the positive use of digital media to access information, collaborate, and build communities with the negative consequences of weaponizing publicly available information for digital vigilantism. Digital vigilantes in this case used their power of voice to exert control over personal information about the rally participants, an effort made easier with the proliferation of two-way social media technologies. In the public's use of Twitter to disclose PII to embarrass and punish the white supremacist rally participants, the people who "transgressed and violated social norms in the first place have now themselves become transgressor-victims" (Cheung 2014, p. 310).

Digital vigilantism can occur from many sides of a debate. As our Charlottesville sample shows, tweets were collected from users expressing differing political and social ideologies, but many citizens agreed that the Charlottesville elected officials and public services, the police department in particular, failed them. Some digital vigilantes tried to correct for the failure through the content of their tweets, sharing information to help the police and the city fulfill their obligations to the citizenry. Our results indicate consumers are highly motivated to resolve perceived breaches in the principal-agent relationship. Whereas previous agency research has assumed power asymmetry between parties, our results indicate that consumers are willing to use their power not just to voice displeasure but also to help resolve agency failure. In the case of the Unite the Right rally, consumer-citizens were helping law enforcement follow through with their service obligation to the community by identifying personal information about members of the alt-right rally participants based on pictures and videos of the participants. Thus, doxxing was used beyond voicing displeasure by citizen-consumers. It was also used to help the police complete their agency obligation to protect the security of citizens. Our findings thus introduce doxxing as a means for digital vigilantes to correct for agent performance failure.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our study fills a gap in knowledge and helps understand how citizens use social media platforms to converse with public agencies. By defining how the public responds during a perceived break in an agency relationship, public managers can develop appropriate monitoring and implementation strategies. User-generated content can serve as alerts when disasters occur closer to home by providing a critical voice outside the silo or organization when traditional warning systems have failed (Leavey 2013). Knowing how citizens will act on social media will, ideally, mitigate knee-jerk responses to angry Twitter mobs. Policies created in knee jerk response to a forced choice situation as that created by angry public sentiment tend to be short-lived and are frequently amended after public backlash shifts elsewhere (Lodge and Hood 2002). This dynamic between government, citizens, and the content created and shared on social media platforms is complex and, to date, extremely understudied (Medaglia and Zheng 2017).

As social media becomes an increasing means of power for consumer voice, it is critical for organizations to engage in social listening and take part in constructive conversations.

This was exemplified by the lack of social media presence of the police department during the Charlottesville event and the apparent frustration people felt and expressed on Twitter. Yet nearly half of local agencies forgo social media (Bonsón et al. 2012), nonprofits face similar challenges responding to online comments and questions, and more than a third (38%) of small businesses with fewer than 500 employees do not use social media (McKeon 2019).

Citizens turn to social media platforms when public and private organizations fail (Leavey 2013). As a result, information and communication technologies such as social media platforms can serve as valuable early warning systems and provide an alternative perspective outside the public agency silo. To realize the benefits of social media, organizations need to invest in and manage a robust social media program capable of listening, harnessing, and reacting to community feedback.

While our research focuses on how individuals interacted with other consumers, and the service provider in this case included local government officials, our analysis is relevant to marketers of other services and goods. We believe there are several key takeaways for organizations to consider when adopting social media monitoring programs and/or creating social media accounts to interact with the public. Our analysis of this incident reveals the challenges facing public service providers and organizations in a variety of service encounters that may be perceived as failures and offers potential methods for addressing digital vigilantism. In Table 3, we describe cluster characteristics on the basis of time, commitment (content type), number of hashtags, and expression of voice (optimism, pessimism, agency, and power constructs) then provide example tweets to illustrate each cluster. Next, we outline the associated challenges based on our analysis. Finally, we delineate responses for each cluster to help public service agencies and other organizations employ preventative and proactive measures to similar events and conversations. We recommend that organizations do the following:

- **Step Up** and quickly address breaches in service expectations in response to digital consumer voices representing "Shame on them!"
- **Make News** by driving headlines to provide corrective information for digital consumer voices characterizing "Hear ye, hear ye..." while identifying and avoiding disinformation.
- **Be Their Solution** and reach out to influencers to drive the narrative online with digital consumer voices exemplifying "Can you believe this?"
- **Investigate to Intercede** by monitoring for civil and legal issues with digital consumer voices personifying "Let's get 'em!" Voices in this cluster may pose actual threats to safety; therefore, content moderation by social media platforms is also important, as noted with Twitter's recent automated approach of flagging abusive content (Kastrenakes 2019).
- **Engage with Influencers** and collaborate to correct content for digital consumer voices typifying "Do the

right thing." As Fred Rogers is famous for saying, "Look for the helpers."

Legal experts surmise that public vigilantism will continue if public trust in community services continues to erode when organizations and services—police in particular—have inadequate resources to follow up on cases (Parkin 2016). Furthermore, high levels of public support for vigilantism correlate with low police responsiveness (Haas, De Keijser, and Bruinsma 2014). This is an important issue for understanding consumer voice from a citizen perspective as well as understanding how consumer anger with public agencies (law enforcement, in this case) can lead to digital vigilantism. Social media platforms are also facing extreme challenges with individuals' first amendment rights and content moderation. This study demonstrates that the power of digital consumer voice is an important issue facing marketing and policy in organizations.

Limitations and Future Research

In our research, we examined consumer digital vigilantism resulting from one break in principals' expectations of agent actions and outcomes. We welcome replication of these findings across similar and different circumstances to determine whether consumer power of voice is expressed using the same five types of content. Of particular interest is the generalizability of the results beyond public services to include business relationships as well as the replication of the pattern of active digital vigilantism across the five types of consumer voice. In mass, our findings suggest that the pattern of consumer voice follows a skewed distribution, with increasing activity soon after a negative break in consumer expectations and then the activity reduces after the first week.

Our work demonstrates that a break in a principal–agent relationship likely motivates citizens to seek solutions and to create and share content in support of doing the right thing. Digital vigilante influencers such as Shaun King and @YesYoureRacist played a significant role in the diffusion of messages calling for, and leading to, solutions. This was demonstrated by Twitter conversations utilizing a handful of hashtags (#Charlottesville, #CvilleAug12, #CvilleCityHall, #GoodNightAltRight, or #ExposetheAltRight). When examined in other contexts, will the influencers also actively call for solutions, and will followers act on those calls for action with retweets of the appeals? Are followers more likely to take action when the online conversation is highly hashtagged? If so, research on early identification of influencers, trending hashtags, and useful intervention strategies is warranted.

A symbiotic relationship between consumer voice and media coverage merits further examination. Consumers were following the news, and spikes in some types of messages (clusters) were exhibited in response to particular types of media stories. In addition, the media noticed some of the

Table 3. Challenges and Recommended Responses.

Cluster	Time, Commitment, and Expression of Voice	Challenges/Issues	Recommended Response
"Shame on them!" (n = 21,409; 29% of data set)	• Solely retweets • Content is 100% focused on harmful intent of shaming • Most cluster content was shared on day one (9,643 tweets) • Lowest amount of pessimistic language (.73[a]) • 2.24 hashtags used in tweets • EXAMPLE: "RT The guy that organized that White supremacist rally in #Charlottesville gets ran off during a press conference"	• Legal issues (slander, privacy violations) • Twitter not liable for any content • Uncertain veracity and validity of information • Emotional issues fuel citizen demands for policy maker action • Content created in reaction to news headlines and trending Twitter topics	**STEP UP** Address breaches in expectations
"Hear ye, Hear ye…" (n = 36,385; 49% of data set)	• Solely retweets • Content is 100% focused on helpful intent of informing • Most cluster content was shared on day five (10,416 tweets) • 1.59 hashtags used in tweets. • EXAMPLE: "RT Berlin Stands with Charlottesville demonstration tonight before the Brandenburg Gate"	• Neutral parties • Uncertain veracity and validity of information • Emotional issues fuel citizen demands for policy maker action • Content created in reaction to news headlines and trending Twitter topics	**MAKE NEWS** Drive headlines with corrective information (prevent disinformation)
"Can you believe this?" (n = 9,370; 13% of data set)	• Solely retweets • Content is 100% focused on helpful intent of solution seeking • Most cluster content was shared on day three (3,598 tweets) • Highest amount of optimism language (23.75[a]) • Highest amount of words related to agency theory and power constructs (19.14[a]) • 1.79 hashtags used in tweets • EXAMPLE: "RT @ShaunKing: WARNING. Criminal evidence. The vicious criminal assault of Deandre Harris by white supremacists. The clearest video. ARREST THESE MEN. #Charlottesville"	• Uncertain veracity and validity of information • Emotional issues fuel citizen demands for policy maker action. • Legal issues related to retweeting PII in effort to seek solutions • Content created in reaction to news headlines and trending Twitter topics	**BE THEIR SOLUTION** Reach out to influencers to drive narrative
"Let's get 'em!" (n = 2,106; 3% of data set)	• Mix of retweets (84%), quoted retweets (15%) and original content (1%) • Content focuses strongly on harm (48%) and shaming (23%) • Most cluster content was shared on day two (664 tweets) • Lowest amount of optimism language (14.89) • Lowest amount of words related to agency theory and power constructs (6.67[a]) • 2.26 hashtags used in tweets • EXAMPLE: "RT w/comment If you can't punch a Nazi, dox one #Charlottesville"	• Uncertain veracity and validity of information • Potentially dangerous group during event • Civil and criminal legal issues (slander, threats privacy violations) • Twitter not liable for any content • May be perceived as trolls by potentially provoking others • Higher content visibility due to number of hashtags (2.26 per tweet) used and high frequency (14.32) • Managing trolls and misinformation can be time consuming	**INVESTIGATE TO INTERCEDE** Monitor for civil and legal issues (e.g., slander, threats, privacy violations)

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Cluster	Time, Commitment, and Expression of Voice	Challenges/Issues	Recommended Response
"Do the right thing" (n = 4,379; 6% of data set)	No retweets, only quoted retweets (84%) or original content (16%) Content focuses on informing (57%) and solution seeking (32%) Most cluster content shared on day five (769 tweets) Highest amount of pessimism language (3.16) 2.04 hashtags used in tweets EXAMPLE: "@CvilleCityHall Please forward to police: Driver: http://bit.ly/32cpxLj"	• Uncertain veracity and validity of information • Civil and criminal legal issues (slander, threats, privacy violations, mistaken identity) • Twitter not liable for any content • Most useful group for public service providers as source of content shared by others (influencers and opinion makers)	**ENGAGE WITH INFLUENCERS** Collaborate for correct content

[a]Measured as the percentage of words related to a LIWC dimension.

consumer vigilantism and, in some cases, became investigative partners in the calls to action. We did not delve into the details of these reciprocal relationships in this study, so additional research from an agenda-setting perspective could be useful to determine if news or the type of news organization (including political affiliation) drives Twitter volume or vice versa. Also, source credibility is increasingly an issue for social media platforms and consumers.

Next, we noted previously that social media use is not common among public service providers and small businesses. When the primary source of their displeasure was not available to consumers on Twitter, we found that consumers communicated using a proxy agent. Because the Charlottesville Police Department did not have a Twitter account, citizen-consumers tagged the Charlottesville City Hall. Potential future research questions involve the ways in which consumers determine proxy agents and how communication with and about the proxies may differ from communication with agents of primary interest. Finally, we recommend that future research address changes and updates to social media platforms, such as guidelines designed to combat disinformation and harassment or limitations on public viewing of participation and engagement on the platforms (Hu 2019).

Editorial Team

M. Paula Fitzgerald served as guest editor and Sterling A. Bone served as associate editor for this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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